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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination
and Protection of Minorities
Forty-ninth session
Agenda item 5 (a)

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN: TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Written statement submitted by Equality Now, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[7 August 1997]

GE.97-13266 (E)

1. Equality Now is an international human rights organization dedicated to ending human rights violations against women, including the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Equality Now is concerned with recent developments in The Gambia and Egypt that are detrimental to the health and welfare of women and girls and would like to raise its concerns with the Sub-Commission under item 5 (a) of its agenda, dealing with traditional practices affecting the health of women and girls.

2. Female genital mutilation includes a range of procedures that involve partial or entire removal of the external female genitalia. Its three most common forms include the partial or total removal of the clitoris (clitoridectomy), the removal of the entire clitoris and the cutting of the labia minora (excision), and the removal of all external genitalia and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva, leaving only a very small vaginal opening for urination and menstruation (infibulation). It is estimated that over 100 million women and girls around the world have undergone FGM and that 2 million girls each year are at risk of suffering some form of FGM. FGM has serious repercussions on the physical, mental, and sexual health of women, including shock, haemorrhage, sexual dysfunction, anxiety, depression, and a broad range of infections, including HIV. The practice is sustained by numerous myths and beliefs about the nature of female sexuality, and it is aimed at maintaining virginity and fidelity in women. FGM is defended in many countries as a rite of passage of women.

Egypt

3. It was previously estimated that 80 per cent of the female population in Egypt had undergone FGM. Yet a 1995 Demographic Health Survey of 14,000 married Egyptian women between the ages of 14 and 49 revealed that 97 per cent had undergone genital mutilation. On 24 June 1997, an Egyptian court overturned a ban that prohibited all licensed health professionals from performing FGM. In his decision overturning the ban, which had been instituted in July 1996 by Health Minister Ismail Sallam, Judge Abdul Aziz Hammade equated FGM to a form of surgery, which doctors have the "right" to perform under the law, without interference from ministerial bodies.

4. Equality Now is deeply concerned by the medicalization of FGM, which some doctors in Egypt apparently support, despite increasing vocal opposition from numerous human rights and women's organizations. FGM is a practice that defies the code of medical ethics, for it serves no medical purpose and inflicts great harm. While Equality Now supports the Egyptian Ministry of Health's appeal of the administrative court decision and the continued enforcement of the prohibition against FGM pending a final court determination, we request that the Sub-Commission inquire as to what specific actions have been taken by the Egyptian Government to eliminate FGM.

The Gambia

5. It is estimated that 70-80 per cent of the female population of The Gambia has undergone FGM, usually in the form of excision, with some incidence of infibulation. On 17 May 1997, Director of Broadcasting Services of The Gambia Telecommunications (GAMTEL) issued a directive prohibiting the broadcast by Radio Gambia (RG) or Gambia Television (GTV) of any programmes

opposing FGM or aimed at eliminating the practice. GAMTEL, a State-owned company which controls Radio Gambia and Gambia Television, is responsible for radio and television stations with the largest audiences in The Gambia and the only ones that reach the entire country. Non-governmental organizations campaigning for the elimination of FGM have issued a protest to the President of The Gambia against the media policy.

6. Equality Now notes that The Gambia is a signatory to several international instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the World Health Organization resolutions against traditional practices and in support of maternal health and family planning. The Government of The Gambia has an obligation to comply with international agreements and to ensure that policies that thwart the campaign to eliminate FGM and that are detrimental to the health and welfare of women are rescinded in accordance with its international obligations.

7. Equality Now respectfully requests that the Sub-Commission address the concerns raised in this statement and inquire as to specific measures implemented by the Governments of Egypt and The Gambia in response to the recent events in those countries affecting the campaign to eliminate FGM. Equality Now also requests that the Sub-Commission call on WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, and other relevant United Nations agencies to take action to support activists and health professionals who are working to stop FGM in their countries.